

24 June 1981

STATEMENT  
OF  
VICE ADMIRAL ROBERT I. PRICE  
U.S. COAST GUARD  
TO THE  
COMMITTEE ON MERCHANT MARINE AND FISHERIES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, I am Vice Admiral Robert I. Price, Commander, Coast Guard Atlantic Area. I have been asked to testify as to the Area Commander's responsibility in the prosecution of a search and rescue (SAR) case concerning an unreported major vessel.

Specifically, my testimony is directed towards the SS POET case.

As Commander, Atlantic Area, it is my responsibility as SAR Coordinator of the Atlantic Maritime Region (includes all navigable waters of the United States east of the Continental Divide, and all waters off our shores in the Gulf of Mexico, most of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean to its approximate mid-point) to ensure that SAR Operations can be prosecuted, whenever necessary, with the best use of resources that are available. This responsibility has been fulfilled through the existence of a SAR

System which includes: (1) Rescue Coordination Centers which are manned around the clock by highly qualified and well-trained coordinators; (2) Comprehensive and current standard procedures and guidelines which are established by the National SAR Manual, the Atlantic Area SAR Plan, and SAR Plans of lower echelon commands from larger Districts to Group Commands within Districts, and finally to the individual stations consisting of one or two boats and a dozen or so personnel; (3) Close liaison and agreements with other services, agencies and organizations having a SAR potential; (4) A communication system which effectively ties together and provides for effective coordination among the elements of the SAR System.

The United States Coast Guard is responsible for the Maritime Region of the SAR System, (The United States Air Force is responsible for the Inland Region within the boundaries of the United States coastline and borders). The SAR System has stood the test of time. It is the recognized model for nations of the International community that are seeking to establish their own SAR capability. With respect to the SS POET, the SAR System operated efficiently and correctly based on well established guidelines and well tested procedures.

You have been previously supplied with the National SAR Plan, and various Coast Guard-published SAR procedures. In addition, I have enclosed a paper I prepared for presentation at the Fifth International "Safety at Sea" Symposium 1979, entitled "A Perspective of Maritime Safety," and a copy of the "International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue" done at Hamburg, Germany 9 thru 27 April 1979.

Basically, I have overall administrative responsibility for SAR cases within Atlantic Area. I rarely interject my judgment into the prosecution

of ongoing cases. Of course I have the ultimate authority to commence a search and to terminate a search. I exercised that authority in the case of the POET. I personally was not advised on the SS POET until Friday, 7 November 1980.

My initial knowledge about the POET came by way of a telephone call from Fred SCHAMANN, Vice President, Marine Engineers Beneficial Association, about noon Friday, November 7th. He informed me that the SS POET, a United States freighter which was carrying grain (corn) to Egypt, should have been at Gibraltar 3 days earlier and had not been heard from since 25 October. The estimated time of arrival in Egypt was 9 November. I passed the information to my staff, which was aware of the unreported status of the vessel. I was informed that Urgent Marine Information Broadcasts and a communications search started on November 3rd and inquiries to Lloyds and other intelligence sources had been made with negative results to date.

My staff received several follow-up calls later that day from various sources, including Union Representatives, and Messrs GOVE and HALL. During these calls, Mr. GOVE and Mr. PARENTE, who is a member of the Brotherhood of Marine Officers, stated that the POET reported religiously to the United States Merchant Vessel Locator Filing System every 48 hours on previous voyages. Throughout Friday evening and early Saturday morning the 7th and 8th November, my staff received a barrage of telephone calls requesting information about the POET and the level of Coast Guard involvement. On

Saturday morning, I was fully briefed and, contrary to the recommendation of my staff, I ordered an aerial search to commence, based on a worst case assumption.

Gentlemen, from my standpoint that is the sequence of events leading to the search of the SS POET .

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